The Cossacks

The Cossacks, pronounced kahs' aks, refers to a group of people that lived predominantly in the former U.S.S.R., specifically in the states of Russia and the Ukraine. They represent a societal group that is comprised of different cultures and lineage including Russian, Polish, Tatar, and others. Because of this diverse ethnic background, they received the name “Cossacks” which can be translated to mean vagabond.

To sustain a livelihood, the Cossacks worked as mercenaries, for which they received land and other benefits, such as exemption from paying taxes. The Cossacks also worked on their privately owned lands and raised animals, although primary agricultural functions were usually delegated to the Cossack women while the men went off to engage in warfare and to perform other military-related duties.

The Cossacks were an extremely close-knit patriarchal society with each separate Cossack clan ruled by a chief, who was called a “hetman”. Other members of the clans looked upon the hetman as if he were a noble, and treated him with all the respect due to a member of upper society. Cossack population rose in number during the 15th and 16th
centuries as both peasants and landowners fled their homelands when Polish forces began attacking and killing the local residents as well as destroying their homes. The people displaced from these struggles formed additional Cossack units, which in turn banded with other existing Cossack groups to form a strong and unified Cossack military force.

Sensing a need for additional military assistance from the Russian government, Bohdan Khmelnytsky (a Ukrainian Cossack chief), established an alliance with Moscow in order to join military forces to expel the Poles from the Ukraine. This alliance did not come without a cost, though, as prior to rendering assistance to the Cossacks, the Russian government made them pledge allegiance to the current czar, Michael. The Cossacks agreed to the pledge and from that point on, they became an important, and influential factor in the growth and development of the military forces within the U.S.S.R.

They became an elite force and were even assigned unique uniforms to identify them. These consisted of a long coat with bullet pockets, brightly colored trousers, and a tall hat. Cossack soldiers were known for their fierce, unquestioning loyalty, and their skill with horses.